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Let's not dim the 'golden age'

Glowing predictions about the dawn of a golden age of information have been made by people intrigued by advances in computers and information technologies. Some foresee a more democratic society. They speculate that citizens will be better informed because their access to information will be more direct.

However, some contemporary events demonstrate that those who hold certain kinds of information often seek to tightly control its dissemination.

The information policies — or more properly, the non-information policies — of the Reagan administration are illustrative of the point. At almost every turn, this administration has put obstacles in the way of the free flow of information from government to citizens.

Consider President Reagan's recently issued executive order, which imposes on the entire executive branch the same tight secrecy that now prevails at the CIA. All employees who handle "classified information" — a very elastic concept — are required to sign non-disclosure agreements that will be binding not only while the employees are in government service but also after their departure. Such employees must promise that speeches and manuscripts — forever after — will be cleared in advance of delivery or publication.

In one worrisome provision, the order permits the firing of someone simply *suspected* of leaking information if the person refuses to take a lie detector test. Given the polygraph's imperfections, such a system puts an innocent person in an unfair squeeze: Refuse the test and be fired or risk somehow flunking the test and having your career jeopardized.

In addition, government agencies will be required to establish censorship panels. That's a prescription for bloated bureaucracy, as well as curbs on the public's right to information.

The clearance requirements, when applied to former officials, are particularly odious. Had such requirements been imposed by earlier administrations, the citizenry could have been deprived of much of the special knowledge, insights and perspective that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brings to the public discussion of defense and foreign policy issues.

There is no question that technological advances offer the prospect that citizens will have more direct access to information. However, the technological marvels of the promised golden age can be reduced almost to toys when governments and other powerful institutions are bent on maintaining a Dark Age of excessive secrecy.